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# Soviet Naval Response to the US Buildup in the Indian Ocean

An Intelligence Memorandum

NSA review completed

NGA Review Completed.

**Top Secret**

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**Soviet Naval Response to the US  
Buildup in the Indian Ocean**

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**Summary**

The Soviets appear to be building up their naval forces in the Indian Ocean in response to the sharp increase in US naval forces in the area related to the Iranian crisis. This is a reversal of their recent practice, which has kept the number of ships in the Indian Ocean Squadron at a low level most of the time over the last year or so.

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The capabilities of the Soviet Pacific Fleet to augment the Indian Ocean Squadron promptly are constrained by:

- The availability of naval units.
- Geography.
- Competing mission requirements.

These constraints probably would limit the ultimate deployment to about five additional surface combatants and about five submarines. Any reinforcements currently being planned would require about 10 days from either the Pacific Fleet or the Black Sea Fleet. We expect the Soviets to send several more auxiliaries needed to support the force at its current size. As of

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The reinforcements symbolize to the world the Soviet Union's concern about the potential for US military action against Iran. At the same time the Soviets probably hope that their presence will deter such action. They will continue to monitor US naval forces, but they probably will avoid challenging them. The USSR will capitalize on the situation, in any event. If the United States does not take military action, the Soviets will claim credit for having deterred it; if limited action is taken, they will claim that their presence restrained the US use of force.

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*This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Soviet Strategic Forces Division, Office of Strategic Research. It was coordinated with the Iran Task Force, the Office of Political Analysis, and the National Intelligence Officers for the USSR and Eastern Europe, Near East and South Asia, and General Purpose Forces. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief of the Soviet Strategic Forces Division, OSR, or [redacted]*

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**Soviet Naval Response to the US  
Buildup in the Indian Ocean** [ ]

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**Recent Developments**

On 4 November, when the US Embassy in Tehran was occupied, the number of ships in the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron was unusually low. In [ ] This was the lowest level in more than two years, and it stayed at about that level for several weeks, with no sign that replacements were on the way. The two Soviet submarines, an F-class diesel attack unit and an E-II-class nuclear-powered guided-missile unit, left [ ] and were not replaced—the longest such hiatus since 1973. [ ]

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The reason for the lull is not clear. Appropriate ships may have been unavailable because of the new demands of maintaining a naval presence of several ships off Southeast Asia. Although the Soviets did not specifically tie their reduced activity level to arms control, they may have been trying to send the United States an encouraging signal with respect to the moribund Indian Ocean Arms Negotiations.<sup>1</sup> In a less generous interpretation, the Soviets' reduced presence may have been intended to demonstrate restraint, providing an implicit contrast with the heightened US naval activity in the Indian Ocean. Whatever the reason, it was overtaken by events in Tehran.

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Since early November the Soviet Navy has begun to reinforce its Indian Ocean Squadron. The Soviets probably view this as a measured response to the sharp rise in US naval forces in the region related to the US-Iranian crisis. A Krivak guided-missile frigate was sent in from the Mediterranean

<sup>1</sup> The substantial Soviet naval support to Ethiopia during the Ogaden fighting during the winter of 1977/78 had adversely affected the US-Soviet discussions on limiting naval forces in the Indian Ocean. [ ]

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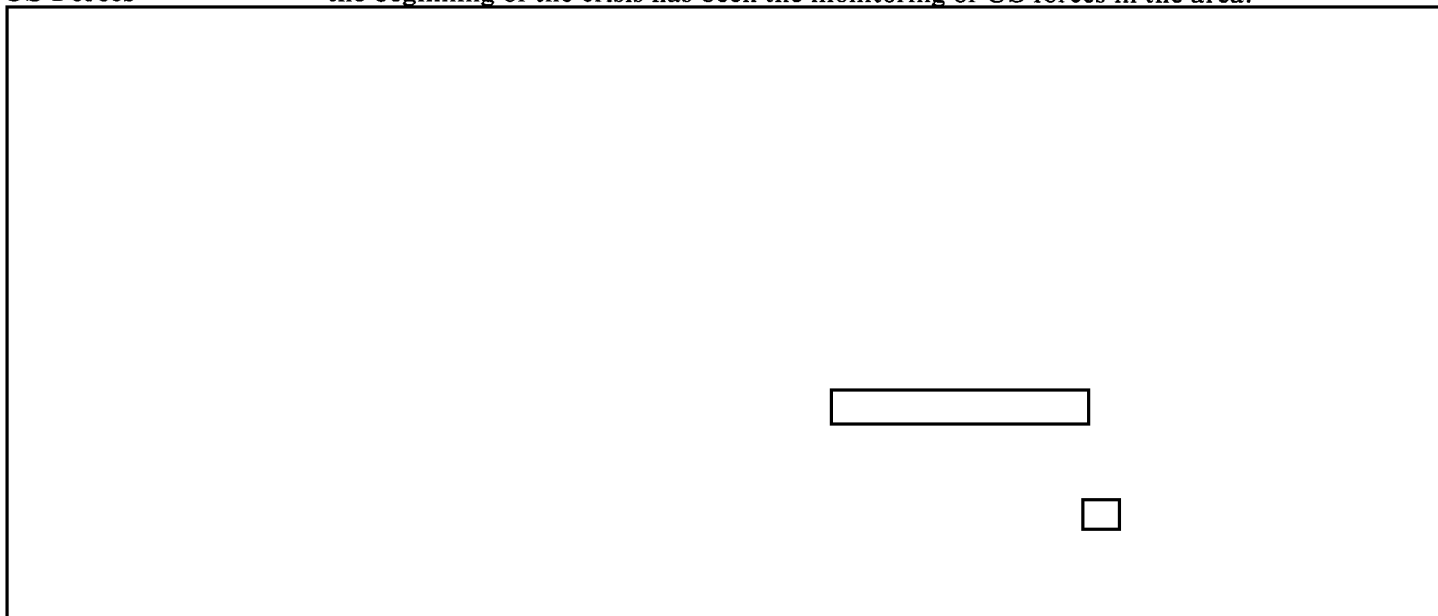
We do not expect the Soviet ships to interfere with US operations, although the reinforcements probably are intended to symbolize Soviet concern over the potential for US military action against Iran and to convey a warning against such action. US naval forces in the area now include

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**Soviet Surveillance of  
US Forces**

As in normal times, a principal activity of the Indian Ocean Squadron since the beginning of the crisis has been the monitoring of US forces in the area.



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**Constraints to Further Reinforcement**

Should the crisis continue, the Soviets are likely to deploy additional ships to the area within a few weeks. A number of factors, however, limit their ability to augment their naval forces in the Indian Ocean quickly. Among these is geography. The home waters of the Pacific Fleet—which provides virtually all of the combatants for the Indian Ocean Squadron—are about 10 days' steaming time from the Indian Ocean and perhaps an additional five days from the Malacca Strait to the Persian Gulf. [REDACTED]

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Another factor is the number of surface combatants available for deployment. There are about 45 combatants in the Pacific Fleet. (This number excludes smaller ships, which often are towed to their operating areas in the Indian Ocean.) About 25 percent of them could not be made ready for deployment in less than 25 days, and another 25 percent would not be able to deploy for five to 25 days. Of the remaining combatants, three

[REDACTED]

also affecting availability is the season: this is the time of year when more repairs are scheduled because the weather is unfavorable for operations. In addition, some evidence suggests the Soviets may be transferring three of the Pacific Fleet's older combatants to the reserve fleet. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets probably would want to keep some of their combatants in the Pacific because the Vietnamese are fearful of another Chinese attack. Since shortly before the first Chinese invasion the Soviets have operated a variety of ships in the South China Sea to show their support for Hanoi. These have included submarines, intelligence collectors, amphibious and support ships, and surface combatants. Since March 1979, there generally have been one to three surface combatants operating off Vietnam. They have made port calls there, and naval reconnaissance aircraft have flown missions from Vietnamese airfields. Hanoi probably regards their presence as a tangible sign of Soviet support. [REDACTED]

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US naval activities in the Pacific also restrict the freedom of action of the Pacific Fleet, because its primary mission is the defense of the Soviet homeland. Although the United States has moved two aircraft carrier groups from the western Pacific into the Indian Ocean, a third carrier group has moved from Hawaii to the western Pacific to replace them. In a period of rising international tension, Soviet concern about this group and other US naval ships in the area will cause them to think twice before further reducing the force level of their Pacific Fleet in home waters. [REDACTED]

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For these reasons we believe the maximum additional Soviet deployment would number at the most five combatants and five submarines. The Pacific Fleet can also spare a number of auxiliary and landing ships to support its

forces there. In view of the recent increase in combatants assigned to the Indian Ocean Squadron, the Soviets are likely in any event to send several auxiliaries to the area. In fact, two auxiliaries appear to be ready to enter the Suez Canal. [ ]

At the time of the Indo-Pakistani war of late 1971, the Soviets sent a number of combatants [ ] to the Indian Ocean in response to the mounting tension in the region and to the US deployment of a carrier task group there. The transit time from the [ ]

notwithstanding, the Soviets took credit at the time for having deterred US military action and for supporting their client, India. They are likely to try to claim similar credit in this case, whatever course of action the United States may follow. [ ]



If the Soviets were considering a rapid buildup of forces in the Indian Ocean beyond the capabilities of the Pacific Fleet, they could draw upon combatants from the Black Sea Fleet, as they did in 1978 during the Ethiopian crisis. Even in this case there are constraints to the number of ships that could be deployed. The percentage of ships immediately available in the Black Sea is about the same as for those in the Pacific. Moreover, the Black Sea Fleet normally provides virtually all of the surface combatants for the Mediterranean Squadron and must have enough forces on hand to support that squadron. The Soviets could either move some combatants directly from the Black Sea to the Indian Ocean or send ships from the Mediterranean and replace them with ships from the Black Sea. Passage through the Turkish Straits and the Suez Canal could involve delays—

[ ] Steaming time to the Persian Gulf from the Mediterranean is about five days if the Egyptians cause no delays, and from the Black Sea is about 10 days. [ ]

#### Outlook

We expect the Soviet ships to continue surveillance of the US ships operating in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In view of the seriousness of the US-Iranian dispute, however, the [ ] Soviet combatants are unlikely to interfere with US forces. The Soviet reinforcement is probably intended to symbolize continuing Soviet involvement in the region and concern over the potential for US military action against Iran—and it may be intended as a warning to this country to avoid such action. If hostilities seem likely, the Soviets might attempt to inhibit US actions by interposing their forces (as they did in the Middle East war of 1973), thereby appearing to be “upping the ante.” But they probably do not intend to use the outgunned Indian Ocean Squadron to counter US forces directly.

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